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Weener, Earl Oral History Interview: Sesquicentennial of Holland, "150 Stories for 150 Years"

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Oral History Interview with
Earl Weener

Conducted September 6, 1997
by Vern Baarman

Sesquicentennial Oral History Project
"150 Stories for 150 Years"
VB: Earl, let's start out by getting the detail and the statistics about you and then we can get into some conversation. As I said, your name is Earl Weener and what was your date of birth?

EW: [date removed], 1923.

VB: And place of birth?

EW: Well, we're right now on Country Club Road. I was born about a half a mile east of here on the top of the hill on East Sixteenth Street. My grandparents owned an 80 acre farm there and my parents had sold their house in town and were living with my grandparents while our house was being built. So I was born on East Sixteenth Street about where the FMB place is right now. The old farm has been sold, of course, to FMB, but I was born in the old farm there on top of the hill.

VB: What was your mother’s name?

EW: Mother's name was Martha Wagenveldt. My grandparents' names are Wagenveldt. My first recollections of Sixteenth Street was that we would go there, especially on weekends. Sixteenth Street was a nice little two lane gravel road at that time, far different from what it is now. There were no houses to speak of along Sixteenth Street. Just an occasional farm. That's where I was born and odd to say my mother was born on the same farm, but halfway down the hill towards the river along Sixteenth Street. There was an older house there, and I recall when we were kids and
playing around there that the foundations were still there yet of that old house halfway down the hill. That’s where my mother was born, so my mother and I were both born on the same property.

VB: Your ancestors, when did they come to this country? Were they immigrants?

EW: My grandmother Wagenveldt (she married a Wagenvelt) came from the Netherlands when she was, I think, about twelve years old, something like that. My grandfather, though, was born in this country. My parents were both born in this country, and of course, they knew how to talk Dutch real good but they never talked it in the house except when they wanted to say something to each other they didn’t want us to understand (laughs). But I never did pick up much Dutch.

VB: Do you wish you could?

EW: Oh, I don’t know. We’re thinking of a trip to the Netherlands some time yet. We haven’t been out there. It would be nice to know a little bit.

VB: What was your father’s first name?

EW: My father’s name was Frank and he came from North Holland - this was called East Holland at that time and he came from North Holland. His dad operated a general store in North Holland which would be at the intersection of Waverly Road and New Holland Street. There was a little community there. They had a general store and there was a school across the street from the store and a church was there. The church is still there but it’s a different church. It’s been rebuilt. My dad, in his younger days, operated a peddle wagon, a horse-drawn peddle wagon, out of that North Holland store. When my dad got old it was fun for us to take him through the
countryside over there because he knew all of the old farms, all the way for miles around that area from his old peddle wagon days. So he came from that part of the country.

VB: When you say "we" are you talking about your brothers and sisters?

EW: No, I mean my dad. I meant "he." He came from that part of the country. No, we lived in Holland. Of course, I was born out here on East Sixteenth Street at the time when the house was being built on the north side. So the only home that I know, really, is our house which was on the north side which is right where Russ’ north side restaurant is now. At that time there were two houses there and nothing across… I can kind of describe that corner. Actually, I’m more familiar with that north side than what I am with Holland because we lived out there. That corner of North River Avenue and Howard Avenue where Parke Davis is now, that was Armor Leather, it was a tannery. And on that corner there was a grocery store on the northwest side of that intersection. Of course, the swamp was on the southwest side on the river there. A grocery store and two little houses next to it. Diagonally across the road was a small gas station and behind that was the township dump. Everybody at that time from Holland too came across the river and threw all their junk there on that corner. Kind of a tendency to try to fill up the swamp which was kind of hopeless (laughs). But then on the other corner, which would be the northeast corner of that intersection (you know where John Vander Ploeg’s bicycle shop is), right there my dad was in partnership with Mart Wiersema and it was called the W&W Oil Company. They had a big gas station there and it was a modern station. It even had two bays for
greasing and oil changing. So they built a new station on that northeast corner of that intersection there. Then they had a bulk plant - several tanks above ground which was just to the east of that a little ways on Howard Avenue. Let’s see, that would be right across from the new D & W, in that area. They had a bulk plant there and the gas and fuel oil, kerosene, would all come in by tank car. They also had in this company two more stations in Holland that they owned. And then they served a lot of different...It was Phillips 66 at that time. They served several gas stations in the area, running as far south as close to Allegan. I know they had three delivery trucks and they had two other guys helping them, so they were in business there with the four of them. They operated the gas station, the delivery trucks, and the bulk plant. Now in the middle of that area as you go just back of...Douglas Avenue was not in there at that time. Douglas Avenue was later. There was a big sand hill there. And that would be pretty much where the old D&W is right now. It would be just south of the railroad track there. A big sand hill and all the kids in the neighborhood would play there in the summertime and take their sleds down the hill in the wintertime. Then on the west side of North River, there was a grocery store on the corner and then two little houses and then it was all empty until you got to our house which is where Russ’ North side is. But behind those houses was kind of a deep ravine and that was a real playground for us kids because there were frogs there and there were grapevines that you could swing on. But that’s all gone. Actually there was a creek running through there, but the creek is now in a big culvert so you don’t see anything of it. That’s all gone but it still empties up into the river there near the bridge. But
that was kind of our playground when we were kids and we went to Beechwood School.

VB: Bet Holland has really changed since then!

EW: Oh man! There was nothing back there. Douglas Avenue was not there. Nothing but open fields from Russ' where we lived to go to Beechwood...you remember where Beechwood School was? Right across from Parke Davis there?

VB: Yeah.

EW: We would just go out of our back door and we had a path through the field and right through the field right to the back of Beechwood School. And there were other paths joining us from the other kids that lived out on Lakewood (laughs). So that whole area there was nothing but open field.

VB: What do you think - have the changes been for the better?

EW: Well, I kind of hated to see Beechwood School be demolished. I really don't know yet why. It was a kindergarten through eighth grade, and it was six classrooms and then there was an older section to the school where there was a 4H room in the basement, a Boy Scout room upstairs, a music room. We had a lot of activities going there in that Beechwood School. Of course, when you are in the grade school age you look forward to summer vacation, but looking back on it now we had a lot of good times there. The school was kind of the center of activity in that area. They had PTA meetings every month and...

VB: Now they bus all the kids.

EW: Yeah. Oh, buses were unheard of. Of course, we walked because it was close. But
PTA meetings once a month, and there was a Boosters Club and they would put on plays, at least a different play every year. And every little type of activity would call for another potluck again.

VB: So it was a social center?

EW: A social center - and picnics! The picnic in the spring the last day of school was always a day to look forward to. Everybody was out. All of the parents, and it lasted all afternoon and evening. It was a nice school. We had a gymnasium too, and so I could play basketball. In the wintertime we even played softball inside during the noon hours.

VB: Was the church near there?

EW: Beechwood Church was built...It started about in 1942, '41 or '42. They built that small chapel first which was kind of across from...Well, Douglas Avenue then of course was through too. But at my grade school time, there was no church out there then yet.

VB: Then where did you go to church?

EW: We went to Ninth Street, the Pillar Church now. We stayed CRC. My dad was from the Reformed Church in North Holland, that was Reformed there, and my mother was Niekerk over here, so they settled on the CRC at that time. Then along came the war and during the war my parents helped organize the Beechwood Reformed Church, and so they stayed right there. I was married during the war - Marcia was from the Pillar Church too - so we stayed at the Pillar Church. Now we go to Calvary Reformed out here.
VB: By "war" you mean...

EW: World War II.

VB: I know you’ve been telling me quite a bit about your family. How about brothers and sisters?

EW: I have an older brother, Bob, four years older, and my sister is two years older. A younger brother, Jay, who was four years younger than I am, he passed away about three years ago. My older brother Bob went on...music was his thing. In fact, during his high school years (he went to Holland High School, I did, too) but in Holland High School he even composed a piece and wrote out all the script for the entire senior band at Holland High School and at his senior band concert the band director let him direct his own number. He went on to Calvin after that and got his masters degree in music. Then he decided that music was great but it was not the best way to make a living, so he went on to get another degree, a masters degree in Special Ed. He and his wife taught, they were both special ed teachers in the Chicago area until his wife passed away, I guess about six or seven years ago. And then Bob moved back to Holland. In fact, he lives right on Country Club Road here. He remarried. He married his wife’s younger sister whose husband died of a heart attack about that time so it kind of kept the same relation going in the family. Bob plays organ at Trinity. He’s one of the organists at Trinity Church. He’s been retired, of course, he’s four years older than I am. But, to get back to this music bit - in Beechwood School we had a band director that came around to all of the so-called country schools. He wasn’t employed by Holland School system at all. His name
was Bert Brandt. I don’t know if you remember that name. He organized bands in all of these little country schools and got an awful lot of kids started on instruments. Of course, he sold the instruments, too, and that’s how he made his living. But I remember him coming to Beechwood School maybe a couple of times a week and we would have band practice - it was a good thing. Except they didn’t like Tulip Time, especially that one Tulip Time. It must have been around 1936, I believe, somewhere in there, one of the earlier Tulip Time parades. He’d take all of these bands from these little country schools and put them all together - one big band for Tulip Time. Somebody got the idea of making little tulip costumes out of crepe paper, and we had to slip that little costume over the top and play the trombone as a little tulip. Everybody had a different colors. Seventh or eighth graders, you know how it feels dressed up like a little tulip (laughs). But Bert Brandt got a lot of kids started on instruments which helped me when I got into high school. We had eight grades and went directly into the ninth grade in Holland High School. When I was a freshman, I signed up for junior band because everybody goes through the junior band and into the senior band. And our first day at class in the band room, the director, when he asked me what my name was, he said, "Are you a brother to Bob?" I said, "Yeah." "Report to the senior band!” (Laughs) I never played one note in the junior band! (Laughs) He just thought I was as good as Bob which wasn’t true at all. But it helped me out. Bob was a real musician. And then my sister Myrtle, she was two years younger and right now she lives in Florida, but she’s up here summertime. She went on to Holland Christian High School. She graduated there. She was going to
go into teaching but then she married a doctor and so teaching kind of went by the board.

VB: What was the doctor’s name?

EW: Overbeek. Ernest Overbeek. He was from Holland from the north side also. His practice was out of Butterworth in Grand Rapids. My younger brother, Jay, he went into the ministry. He was a little too young to get into World War II. Both Bob and I were in World War II but Jay was a little too young. He went into the ministry and he’s been a pastor all his life except the last five years when he was professor of preaching at Western here in Holland until he died of a heart attack a few years ago. My mother died of an injury in a car accident and at the age of about seventy-five, I believe. My dad lived until he was ninety-four. In good health all the time - just finally gave out, passed away in a nursing home while eating his dinner sitting by the table.

VB: Which nursing home was he in?

EW: One in Hudsonville.

VB: How many children did you have?

EW: I’ve got six children. You want to know where they are now?

VB: Sure! I see their pictures on the wall there.

EW: Our oldest son, Earl, went on to U of M and graduated with a doctorate degree in aerospace engineering. Right now he is chief systems engineer at Boeing out in the Seattle area, so he’s been climbing the ladder in management and he reports directly to one of the vice presidents of Boeing. Of course, there’s over three hundred vice
presidents out there at Boeing (laughs) But still it’s a big organization. He’s pretty well up there. Our daughter Jan, the next one, went on to get her doctorate degree in biostatistics. Right now she’s married and lives in New Jersey, and she works for AT&T. Her husband tells me that AT&T kind of considers her as their chief computer whiz to keep the bugs out of their computer systems. So she specialized in computers. She married a person, Craig is his name, and he graduated from one of the schools in California. He went to MIT, also, in Massachusetts. He has a doctorate degree and specializes in laser technology for optical fibers. He worked for AT&T for a while, but he decided he has too many ideas of his own so about three years ago he quit AT&T and I helped him build his lab in his basement over there and he’s right now an inventor. He’s got his first product on the market and it’s looking like it’s going to be pretty good. It’s a monitor that goes into an optical fiber line. Just like there are pressure gauges in water lines and in steam lines, this is a monitor that will ... it’s right in line with the fiber optic cable. It’s about the size of a big candy bar, but it will give the reading and the voltage, the light intensity of the laser beam that goes through it it will read it out directly - a digital reading. There’s nothing on the market like it. He has applied for the patent and is pretty sure of getting it because there is nothing like it. So what he’s doing right now is building these things in his basement. All of the components of it he has farmed out to different companies in that area. It’s a high tech area there where he lives in New Jersey. He says everything is about twenty-five miles away. So he has all the components built in the area and he just assembles them in his basement. It’s quite
an ingenious device.

VB: Sounds like it!

EW: Well, he knows how to put a certain bend in the optical fiber that will cause about five percent of the laser light to scatter, and it collects that scattered light and puts it into a photoelectric cell and from there it gets and electric current and measures it. I know those little gadgets sell for close to $2,000 a piece. But the price will come down as soon as he’s figured out how to make more. He’s only had it on the market for a year and a half, and he has three people working for him now in his basement and they can’t hardly keep up with the orders. It’s just kind of taken off. And it comes in from all over, even the U.S. Navy has bought some from him. NASA bought some from him. Of course, AT&T bought quite a few from him. He’s working on another variety of it for AT&T - especially for them. No, he left AT&T on good faith, and so AT&T is really his best customer right now. Of course they want him back anytime he wants to come back (laughs).

VB: They’ll get him for a dollar per patent, right? (laughs)

EW: Anyhow, that’s our daughter, Jan. Our son Ron and his wife are in South Africa. Ron is a pilot and works for Mercy Air, which is the aviation arm of Youth With A Mission. He organized the base in South Africa in 1990, I believe, so they’ve been back here several times. They come and go.

VB: They’re like bush pilots, aren’t they?

EW: Yeah. It has grown from one plane and one pilot to three planes and three pilots. He’s coming back Christmas time to try to recruit another pilot and mechanic. If he
can get it all in one person he’d love it because he’s the only really qualified mechanic to do the work on the planes. And they want to look for another airplane too. So they’re shooting for three planes and four pilots if they can find that. So we’re looking forward to them coming for Christmas.

VB: Does he have a certain period of time that he’ll be home or will he... Will it be a month or two months?

EW: It will be at least a month I think when they come. But initially when they started out he and his wife, Barb, flew the single engine plane all the way from Park Township Airport here to South Africa. They took from St. John’s, Newfoundland, and from there to the Azores and to the Canary Islands and then to the continent of Africa and then down. He’s flown across the Atlantic now twice with single engine planes and once with a twin engine Beech.

VB: There’s nowhere to go if your engine quits.

EW: He knows the Atlantic pretty well. Well, they keep a pretty close tab on them and you have to have the lifesaving equipment on board. And you have to report with your long distance radio every hour, I believe. With the global positioning units that they have, if they have to go down, emergency land somewhere, they’d have their raft and they could radio the exact location where they are. So it’s not quite as hazardous as it used to be because they’ll know exactly where he went down almost within a hundred feet or so accurate. Our next daughter, Mary, married Tom Meek. Tom has his masters degree in what is it - a health physicist, I guess you’d call him. Right now he’s plant manager of a nuclear power plant in Oregon, so they live out
there. Of course, the nuclear plant now is being disassembled because water power is so cheap. The nuclear plant couldn’t compete. But anyhow, Tom is assured of a job for a long time yet because every little piece of that plant that they take apart has to be disposed of just in a certain way. So they’re doing well out there. They live in Clatskanie, Oregon. The next one is Allen. He lives in Glen, south of here. Allen is a builder, a carpenter, and I’ve been helping him out occasionally since retirement. I’ve spent a lot of hours working with him on jobs that he needed some help on. Our youngest son, Carl, lives in Zeeland, and he works for JB Technology. They make custom machinery. It’s north of Holland a ways. It’s a small machine shop and they build custom machinery. A lot of it goes to Steelcase and Haworth and the plastics industry - a lot of injection molds and conveyors and that sort of thing. So he’s doing good, too, and enjoys his job.

VB: You graduated from Holland High in what year?

EW: ’42. We just had our fifty-fifth reunion last June.

VB: Wow!

EW: (Laughs). The class is getting smaller, Bud. Oh, there are a lot of them who don’t come, of course. But still it’s quite a good sized class. Our class was about 225 kids, I believe at the time.

VB: That was big!

EW: Holland had some pretty good sized classes, even back then.

VB: They came in from other…

EW: All the surrounding areas.
VB: Like Hamilton and...

EW: Yeah, oh sure. At that time...Well, when was Hamilton High School built? I'm not sure.

VB: Like East Saugatuck and Saugatuck - they all came to Holland?

EW: Yeah, they all came to Holland. And north of Holland, too, because West Ottawa wasn't in existence then yet.

VB: So that's a pretty good sized class. Then did you go into service after high school before you went to Hope?

EW: After high school. I was in service for three years after high school. Well, wait, I got started at Hope College. I started one semester in '42 at Hope College and then got to February and then I went into the service.

VB: That's so typical of everyone at that age. They started college and just got started and then they got drafted or enlisted to be able to choose the service they wanted to be in.

EW: And three years later I was out and went back to Hope College again under the GI Bill. And an awful lot of my high school classmates joined me again at Hope College! (Laughs)

VB: Was that 1946 or '45?

EW: I started in the fall of '46 under the GI Bill. Of course, we were married then and had two children.

VB: Were you married before...?

EW: No, I was married during the service before I went overseas.
VB: Where did you serve overseas? In what country?

EW: England. We were in the Battle of the Bulge, or right nearby anyhow. We were in England at the time the Battle of the Bulge started and we were headed for the Bulge. But then as we crossed the English Channel one of our troop ships was torpedoed so we lost about 800 soldiers crossing the Channel. So our division had to wait for recruits, and by the time we were up to full strength again the Battle of the Bulge was pretty well done. So I was in England and then in France and a little while in Germany, but didn’t see very much action really - after the main action went through. And we were part of the Army of Occupation for a while but...

VB: What did you take at Hope College? What courses did you take?

EW: I just took chemistry (laughs). I started at Holland Color and Chemical the day after I graduated from Hope.

VB: And that’s where you retired.

EW: That’s where I retired. I couldn’t afford to wait any longer - not with two children (laughs). C. R. Trueblood and Ralph Eash. It was Holland Aniline and Dye before that. When I was a kid I remember Holland Aniline Dye because the guys that came out of there were all purple! They left purple tracks in the snow wherever they went.

VB: That’s an interesting story. I’ve heard that before. What was the name of that fellow that left his tracks in the snow?

EW: It might have been Teddy Nerken. When we were kids, I remember Holland Aniline Dye because that north side was our playground, especially in the summertime. We would swim in the river by the bridge there on the north side and we would go across
Lake Mac with a bunch of us always swimming. And we'd go to Kollen Park. They had a nice high diving board there at Kollen Park at that time.

VB: Would you swim in it today?

EW: I don't know (laughs). It might be cleaner today than it was then. I don't know. I know it wasn't very clean then either, but when you're a kid in grade school you didn't usually care too much. But I know a good many times we would swim across the lake. We'd go in right where the BASF plant is, right about there. There was that big old... It was called the Vacatap Washing Machine plant right across Howard Avenue from BASF. No, it was a little bit east of that a ways. It was maybe a quarter of a mile east of that.

VB: There was an old four-story factory in there...

EW: That's what I mean, yeah. Then Heinz used it as a storage plant. But that's where we'd go in the water and swim across the lake. At that time you could touch bottom when you were halfway across the lake yet on that side because the shipping channels were all on the south side of Lake Mac and the level of the lake wasn't near as high as it is now. So it wasn't too hazardous to swim across the lake especially when you were with a bunch of kids all of whom could swim real well because if you did get tired you could stand up and rest in the middle (laughs) We would do that a lot - swim across to Kollen Park.

VB: So you think maybe it was the same condition it is now?

EW: Oh, I think so. I think the old sewage plant was probably worse at that time than it is now. I don't know.
VB: Probably less treatment.

EW: Less treatment maybe. I know it sure smelled like ever on the north end of Holland at that time. It still does a little if the wind...

VB: Well there was the tannery too that smelled a little.

EW: The tannery smelled. They were polluting the water there. It's a wonder us kids survived.

VB: If you ever got sick did they ever attribute it the water?

EW: No. I don't think any of us were sick from it. And we had another nice swimming hole...

VB: Well, maybe people were tougher then, what do you think?

EW: I don't know (laughs). We had another swimming hole up the river a little bit further where that meat packing company is. And that was a neat place. We had our own diving board there where we buried the plank into the bank and a nice little springboard, covered it with burlap. We had a nice swimming hole there. But during August, which we would call "dog days," the river would be covered with green algae and we'd have to dive in a few times in order to get the algae to go away to clean up the water (laughs)!

VB: You were brave!

EW: We thought the water the water was cleaner there because it was upriver from the Holland sewage plant.

VB: Was it downriver from the meat plant?

EW: That wasn't there at the time. There was nothing there. Big open fields. But it was
definitely upriver a little bit from where the sewage plant emptied in. But we were never afraid even to swim by the bridge, and that was downriver from the sewage plant. But my dad liked the beach, so we’d go to Ottawa Beach an awful lot in the evenings. That was nice clean water then compared to what we were used to. (Laughs). But cold!

VB: So you went to Ninth Street Church and you graduated from Hope. Anything more we should know about your life at Hope College?

EW: Well, I know in my freshman year in ’42, I was on the tug of war team and we won. Then three years later when I went back as a sophomore, I went on the team again and we won then too (laughs).

VB: The same guys back from the service?

EW: They were the same ones from the service, yeah. I remember we won both times I was on the Pull, so I never did get pulled through the river.

VB: Do you think Hope has changed since those days?

EW: It’s kind of hard to say. I know it’s a lot bigger now than it was.

VB: I guess they have a hard time finding places for people to stay now.

EW: Yeah, I suppose. Of course, we lived on the north side. We bought a little house there after I got out of the service. While in school I was working...well, we went under the GI Bill. That helped an awful lot. It paid the tuition and the books for me and gave us, I believe, $120 a month besides to live on. And summers I worked at Chris Craft and during the school year I worked at Heinz. There were more students who worked at Heinz in the evening. One of them was in my German class. I forget
what his name was. So we had just certain duties to do. We were in a cleanup area. We had to clean a certain section that the day shift...After they left, there were pickles all over the place. So we’d get on these rubber boots and aprons and turn the steam hose on everything, spray everything off and sweep all the pickles off the floor. When our job was done, our foreman knew that we were students. He was real good to us. He says, "You can take your books and you can study for the rest of the shift." So we would hurry in and get our work done, and that’s how we got our studying done too. It worked out good.

VB: But that wasn’t during the green season...

EW: That was after the green season. They were still processing pickles. They processed them all year around. During the green season, I think they just took them in and put them in these storage vats with salt and stuff like that. And so all winter long they would process pickles. Needless to say, I had to leave my clothes out in the breezeway at our little house when I got home in the evening (laughs) or else it would smell like pickles!

VB: So you didn’t really live on campus at Hope College. You lived at home.

EW: You miss a lot of the college life that way.

VB: Have you been back there at all? Have you done anything with Hope since you graduated?

EW: No, not really. Been to a couple of their class reunions at Hope, but aside from that not much really.

VB: Are you still going to Ninth Street Church?
EW: Calvary Reformed.

VB: Oh, you go to Calvary Reformed. On Eighth Street.

EW: Yeah.

VB: Do you think Holland has changed drastically since those days?

EW: Very much so. Where we live now on Country Club - when we bought in '54 this road was gravel, and now you have to be careful when you back out of the driveway during certain times of the day. Sometimes it's a solid stream of cars coming past here. A lot of them getting to Sixteenth Street and going out to the expressway, and a lot of them to Sixteenth Street and going to the factories south of Holland. It's changed an awful lot. When we built there was nothing on this road in the line of houses except the two on the corner, the city farm and the house right across from it and the school over there. This was called Van Raalte School District. Our kids all went to school here in this little building on the corner.

VB: Oh, did they?

EW: At the time I served on the school board for a number of years as secretary of the school board. Then we kind of outgrew this school and then we built the one in Holland Heights here. And we built that one. In fact, I remember driving with Ben Van Slooten to Lansing to sign all these bonds. I don't know how many bonds we didn't have to sign, the two of us. He was president of the school board and I was secretary before they gave us the check (laughs). And we came back home and wanted to stop at a restaurant and we hardly had any money with us. (Laughs) Shall we show them this check? I forget what it was. It was close to two hundred
thousand dollars, which was a lot of money then.

VB: In those days, yeah.

EW: Then we built this little school in Holland Heights here.

VB: At that time I guess people out of college were making three hundred dollars a month.

EW: Probably less than that.

VB: So, two hundred thousand dollars was a lot of money!

EW: It was. We built five rooms over there. There’s more than five rooms now. They’ve added to it. They built five rooms and the gymnasium. Then we had classes in both the schools here, and then shortly after that the school district was merged with Holland School System.

VB: Oh, you had your own school system.

EW: Yeah. It was called Van Raalte School District.

VB: That’s why you were on your own.

EW: We were on our own here, yeah.

VB: Were you on any other civic organizations?

EW: No, not really.

VB: Kiwanis or Rotary? Or anything like that?

EW: No. Sang with a male chorus which was called the Magna Chords Male Chorus. At that time it was organized by Cal Langejans which later was merged with the Bel Canto Singers which was a women’s group. And that was the beginning of the Holland Community Chorale. I stayed on with the Chorale for about two years, the first two years. Then it became so demanding. They’d go on these weekend retreats
and do nothing but sing, and when you have a family at home you just can’t do that. So I dropped out. But it was fun.

VB: You did other singing too, though, didn’t you?

EW: Yeah. (End of Side A)

VB: You were talking about singing at weddings. For how long did you do that?

EW: Oh, for quite a few years. Not of late because, well they usually like younger guys to sing at weddings (laughs). But I remember some years as many as twenty-five weddings in the summer I would sing for. Kept track of them on the calendar. Had to keep track of the dates then because sometimes there would be two weddings in a week. It was more than once that there were two weddings in the same evening I would sing for. But I’ve kind of gotten away from it. No, I sang for a wedding yet this summer - my grandson’s in Seattle. That’s one I wanted to sing for.

VB: That’s a long trip!

EW: Yeah. We went there for a week in the first part of August. Just flew out there and flew back. But I don’t do much singing right now anymore. Usually in the fall I sing in our own church maybe once or twice and then in the spring once maybe. Not so much anymore. It’s kind of nice to just be retired (laughs). When you want to leave you can leave.

VB: Right! Not have that schedule you have to keep.

EW: That’s right. I’d like to go back to some of those grade school days in Beechwood because we had an unusual principal of our grade school there. His name was Raymond Lamb. He was well-liked by all of the students, but there was absolutely
no nonsense in his class time. Everything was strictly business. He was an excellent teacher. Everybody respected him and was a little bit scared of him. But come recess and noon hours, he’d be out there playing ball with us or else work in the workshop with us. In Beechwood School, we had a big workshop in the basement. They had all kinds of power tools there just like you would find in a high school shop. They had a table saw, a drill press, a band saw, jigsaw, joiner, lathe. We would have 4-H in the school. That we would have during noon hours and after school. He would teach the classes during the day like at noon hour and after school, Ray Lamb would. And he was an excellent craftsman too. So the kids all just related to him because he was kind of one of you. But in the classroom don’t act up. It was strictly business in the classroom. He was a good athlete too. He could walk across that gymnasium on his hands! He organized a tumbling team there of some of us kids, and we put on a little exhibition at one of the PTA meetings, I remember. But the 4-H was quite big at that time. The handicraft, the woodworking. And it carried right on through high school. In fact, I was in the 4-H there in Beechwood right through my senior year in high school, because we’d have 4-H classes in the evening. Then in the evening we had a fellow by the name of Jim Van Eyl, a furniture maker for Holland Furniture Company. He lived in the area. He liked to work with us kids, and so we had him as a teacher in the evening classes of 4-H. Just about every Achievement Day, every year at the end of the season you know you had a county Achievement Day. Generally it was in Coopersville. Our 4-H club would almost always take top honors. Mostly because we had participating super
guys to teach us. Else we wouldn't know how to go about it, you know.

VB: Were they parents of the children that went there or...

EW: Oh sure. Jim Van Eyl had children in there. Course not the teacher, Ray Lamb. He didn't have any children there.

VB: Do you think that would be possible in the Holland schools today?

EW: Well, they have their regular shop, I'm sure, and that probably does the same thing. But at that time 4-H was real popular. I guess it still is more in rural communities than what it is in the city areas.

VB: There's quite a change going on in the school system in Holland with the... You know, we've always had the public schools and the Christian school. But now we have the charter schools. What do you think about that?

EW: Well, I think the competition is good in a way. When you look back on things, Beechwood School was a six-room school with a gymnasium. Six teachers. The principal was a teacher - Ray Lamb. There were no secretaries. So the only expense to the school board as far as salaries would be for the teachers and the janitor. When Van Raalte School joined Holland City School system then the principal, who was a teaching principal here, he had to move to the new school at Holland Heights. But they wouldn't let him teach. He spent two or three miserable years there. He didn't know what to do with himself. They made him principal of it and he wanted to teach. But they wouldn't let him teach, and I guess they gave him a secretary and an office and made him principal.

VB: And he didn't like it.
EW: He didn’t like it. He wanted to teach. And before we merged with the Holland School system he handled the whole job himself and taught and enjoyed it.

VB: Well, that’s why I asked about the school system because you served on the school board. You had a lot of experience and I just wondered how you felt. Holland has grown and the school system has gotten larger and how you see the school system today compared to how it was back then when you were involved.

EW: Well, I’m sure they need counselors and all these non-teaching professionals too. But it is costlier. And you kind of wonder whether the children are actually turning out any better now than what they were then.

VB: I guess their criteria is what kind of students are coming out now compared to back then.

EW: That’s right. But I know that the overhead in the school systems has changed an awful lot compared to what it used to be.

VB: Per student?

EW: Per student. Teachers and janitors were the only ones that had to be paid, you know. Salaries were teachers and janitors. When we were Van Raalte School district, we didn’t have any superintendent either. It was just a small district, of course. One school. And the school board did get paid. They were paid jobs but very nominal…

VB: Voluntary type pay.

EW: Like a couple hundred a year was about what it amounted to. Seventy-five for trustees. I was one of the higher paid ones being secretary. I think I even got more than the president did because I had more work. The treasurer. He was the one that
worked the hardest. I remember once he came up a dime different from the bank statement, and he spent I guess the whole evening trying to figure out where that dime went. And you had to find out where it went at that time. And he finally went to the bank and the bank made the mistake.

VB: In those days that was unusual.

EW: Ten cents! (Laughs)

VB: Today the bank says "No, that’s only ten cents."

EW: That’s right.

VB: There was a lot of pride in what people did.

EW: Oh, I think so.

VB: I think people were proud of doing a good job. Do you think that’s changed?

EW: I’m sure it has. I don’t think they take the pride in it like they used to. There’s more jumping from one job to the next. I’m not sure about the charter schools just how that works. But I think they do try to compete. I think they can do it cheaper, don’t you? Educate cheaper?

VB: I have no idea. The only thing I noticed is that this one going up on 120th and Riley is being run by a for-profit company. They’re taking the tuition that they get from the state and they’re running that school, and building a new school, and doing it on the per student tuition. Now, that sounds almost impossible. And supposedly make a profit. So I was wondering how you felt about the charter system.

EW: I’m not familiar with it enough really to know. I really don’t know much about it.

VB: But maybe that speaks to what you were saying earlier about...They only had one
secretary for the whole school or janitor and the teachers and no secretary actually.

EW: They didn’t have any secretary. One janitor at each school and then the teachers.

VB: I question if we could even do that today. Have a teaching principal.

EW: Well, they wouldn’t let us when we joined the Holland School system. That wasn’t their policy. The principal did not teach. And I think they even gave him an assistant who wasn’t teaching either. And I know he was miserable the first couple years after he was kind of more or less told he couldn’t teach any more. He had to be the principal. He didn’t like it. But anyhow...maybe that’s progress.

VB: How do you feel about the Holland city government these days?

EW: I don’t know. I’ve had a little experience with this property right behind us here.

VB: Where they wanted to build the multi-family units?

EW: Yeah. They wanted to change the zoning from class A-1 (single family residences) to another category which would permit them to build these units back here. But we had a meeting in Calvary Church and our councilman was there, Joe Haveman, and one other councilman-at-large was there too. But it took quite a bit of persuading to get Joe Haveman to change his opinion. He was in favor of changing it so that the multiple units could be built. It took quite a lot of talking to persuade him not to go along with it.

VB: What do you think would be the problem with adding those multiple units?

EW: The big objection was that they were afraid of government subsidized, low cost apartments. That it would turn into that which was basically what’s on that side of Country Club here. Everybody at that meeting wanted to keep it as it was, the all
single family dwellings on this side of Country Club Road. And when you look at all
the nice big homes back there I can see where those people were a little scared of this
sort of thing. Because that’s not the most desirable community across the street here.

VB: Do they have problems there?

EW: Sure! One of the biggest drug raids in Holland was just over on Stafford, just a
couple blocks away.

VB: So you think that maybe the type of housing there contributes to that problem.

EW: I think so. These are all low priced housing, these apartment houses here.

VB: What has that done to the school here, the local school?

EW: I don’t really know.

VB: I thought some of the people were concerned that it would overload the school.

EW: Oh, sure. That was brought up too, I recall that too. Bring in more people. I know
these people got to go somewhere. It’s just a matter of where. (Laughs)

VB: Right. I guess that’s what the city has to deal with. They’ve got to provide the
housing. Nobody wants it in their backyard.

EW: That’s right.

VB: Overall, do you think the city is handling it well?

EW: Well, I guess so. I wouldn’t care to be in their shoes really to tackle those problems,
but in some respects I don’t like to see somebody that’s president of the Holland
Builders Association being on the City Council. I think there’s a little conflict of
interest there. That’s the way a lot of people in this area see it.

VB: I see. But I guess he could be for building but maybe in some other area, I guess.
EW: Yeah. (Laughs) I won’t go any further than just to say that there could be a conflict of interest there.

VB: Was he involved in the multiple units?

EW: Yeah.

VB: I see.

EW: Well, he wanted it changed so that they could be built. But after the meeting here, he decided to change his mind and not vote for it, or not promote it. So that’s why it’s still staying the same here and that’s why this is all empty behind us here. The twenty acres there that were going to be divided up into these multiple units. But the fellow that owns the twenty acres, originally he planned to plot it out into individual lots and sell it that way. But I guess the cost of putting the road through here and all of this, because there has to be access to this area. The cost of putting in the road, the sewer, the water and electricity and everything is almost too great if you’ve got to subdivide it into thirty houses rather than a hundred and fifty apartments. So I don’t know the answer to it. It’s expensive (laughs). But anyhow it’s still empty behind here. That’s probably the reason.

VB: What’s the reason for the need for these multiple units?

EW: Just a fast growing community. Very fast.

VB: Do you think a fast growing community is good for Holland?

EW: As far as employment is concerned, it’s very good, I’m sure. Our unemployment here I guess is almost nil. Anybody that wants to work can find a job. Not always the job they want, but they could find work. Holland is really growing and all
Western Michigan is growing real fast.

VB: Are we paying too big a price for that?

EW: I don't really know. And how can you stop it if you do want to stop it. (Laughs).

VB: Oh, I don't think you can stop it. HEDCOR was formed how many years ago?

EW: Sure. And that was to promote the industry. It was a good thing.

VB: It was in the early sixties wasn't it, that they started HEDCOR?

EW: So many people I know used to drive to Grand Rapids to work and now it's kind of the other way. A lot of people from Grand Rapids come to Holland to work.

VB: Right. Having lived here all your life, do you think it's good for Holland? It's change.

EW: Yeah. It's change. In some respects it's change for the good, I'm sure. But you could always be a little selfish and in a way you don't like the change. (Laughs) Then I suppose you should move to Alaska (laughs).

VB: Well, I guess from our perspective we're just not looking for jobs anymore, being retired.

EW: That's right. We look at it from the other side. But for somebody that's looking for work and has a family to raise and so on, well it's a good community I'm sure to be in. Good opportunities.

VB: Do you think it's created some controversy? You see a lot in the paper about diversification and...I guess things we were never worried about years ago.

EW: No. I don't know.

VB: In a sense, that's one of the changes that's come to Holland with the growth.
EW: Yeah. A lot of different industries. Holland used to be primarily, well, Holland Furnace Company and the furniture factories and a few machine shops. Boy, now it's a lot of high tech industries.

VB: Holland Aniline and Dye. Well, they had machine shops down on Eighth Street, didn't they, on the west side of Eighth Street?

EW: Yeah. There's still one there. It's been closed for a long time. That's that Western Machine near Kollen Park. A friend of mine is part of the family that owned it and he was in there a while back. He says it's just amazing to go in that place. It's been idle for decades, but he says every piece of machinery and every tool is still in the place where it was when the men walked out of it the last time. He said it's just like a museum in there. So that's one place that ought...I don't know in whose hands it is any more but...

VB: Is it the far end?

EW: It's on this side of Kollen Park.

VB: I think the city owns it now, and they're trying to decide what to do with it.

EW: But this guy says it ought to be kept as a museum because everything is there just like it was when they walked out - and that was a long, long time ago.

VB: Well, maybe that's a good suggestion to the city to make a museum out of it if they haven't already considered it. Well, you went away in the service and left Holland for quite a long time and then you came back. Was it pretty much the same?

EW: Yeah. Holland was pretty much the same when we got back.

VB: Not like today. You spend the same amount of time away today you'd...
EW: You'd probably see bigger change. No, I think Holland was pretty much the same after three years. Of course, business was booming right after the war too. All the factories were turning back to their normal goods, automotive factories were coming back to making automobiles and stuff like that. (Telephone interruption).

VB: Maybe we could talk a little bit more about what you did at Holland Color. I know we both worked there so we sort of assumed that I know what you did. So maybe we just ought to get on tape what you did there.

EW: I was hired in February, '49. Worked in the research and development lab. Started with Dr. Enno Wolthuis, the professor from Calvin. He was there in the summers and occasionally during the week, too. I worked in the pigments area mostly doing bench work. Started with bench work and later on I got to be group leader in one area of the research and development group. And that's kind of where I left it, more of less. I've always been happy to spend my time on the bench doing the actual work. Management never really did appeal to me, so I was happy where I was at. In fact, I very much liked my job there at Holland Color, which later of course became Chemetron Corporation and finally BASF.

VB: You stayed on the technical side.

EW: I stayed on the technical side which was really where I wanted to be, and I enjoyed it.

VB: Dr. Roland Meyer?

EW: Yes. I had him as one of my bosses. I had several of them over the years. (Laughs). It's been so long - I forgot all of that.

VB: Did it change very much when they were acquired by BASF?
EW: In our area it really didn’t change much at all. We just got a new research director. His name was Reinhart Sappock. But it really didn’t change as far as we were concerned. We still did the same old problems that we were normally doing. Most of the changes were probably in the sales and management areas and maybe in the plant. I don’t know. Our jobs were not affected much by the change to the German company.

VB: There’ve been acquisitions going on in Holland. Prince was bought out by Johnson Controls and now FMB has been bought out by Huntington Bank out of Ohio. I know many people get a little bit concerned when they go through an acquisition. You didn’t notice too much change in your area when BASF acquired?

EW: No. Actually none at all. It really didn’t affect us in the least.

VB: It was probably smart to stay on the technical side then. You didn’t have to worry about...(Laughs)

EW: That’s right. It wouldn’t affect us. I’m sure in the sales organization it was completely different because I understand their sales techniques in Germany are much different than ours were in this country. Our salesmen had to be more actively engaged in trying to get the customers to change over from whatever they were using to our products, whereas in Germany I understand certain companies made red and other companies made blue and another yellow and they didn’t compete in each other’s areas.

VB: Yeah. If we did that in this country we’d be in trouble legally.

EW: Yeah. (Laughs). So in the sales organizations I’m sure it made a big difference in
management. But it didn’t affect our area at all. One interesting highlight is that the fellow that worked for me for at least twenty-five years, I retired and he found a lot on Crooked Lake just two houses away with one lot in between where our cottage is and lo and behold he bought that and put up a year-round home there. So I still can’t get rid of Herm (laughs).

VB: Was that Herm?

EW: Herm Kromendyke. Not that I want to get rid of Herm. We’re good friends over the years. But it’s kind of interesting that he lives now with one house in between us and he on Crooked Lake. Built a year-round home and he’s selling his one in Holland. They’re going to live there permanently. Except they’re going to go to Arizona in the winter.

VB: So you think many jobs were lost when BASF moved out of town? Have you heard from any of those people?

EW: I don’t know. I haven’t kept up on it really.

VB: Did you go back to the Twenty-five Year Club?

EW: I went to all of them so far except last fall. Then we were in Florida one day too long. I had our plane scheduled to come back wrong. Went down there to drive my sister down, and then we flew back. But I made a mistake on the reservations and it happened to be the night of the Twenty-five Year Club that we were flying from Florida to Holland. So I missed it. That’s the first one I missed but...

VB: So you hear a little bit about what’s going on?

EW: Oh, sure. So Rucker Wickline was there now and he’s the man in charge, I guess, of
the Holland plant. He says as long as he's there there will always be a Twenty-five Year Club meeting. That's good news! There'll be one coming up again this fall and I can catch up on all of the gossip (laughs).

VB: Well, we can wrap it up now unless there's something that you'd like to go back that we missed or that you'd like to pick up on or a story you'd like to tell.

EW: No, I can't think of anything more, Bud. Pretty well covered all of the high points that I think might be of interest to other people.

VB: Well, you'll be getting a transcript of this so you'll know what's on it. It'll go into the Archives as a tape and as a transcript, and they'll use that to put together stories about the last fifty to seventy-five years of Holland.

EW: I'm glad somebody like yourself is taking hold and doing these things.

VB: Well, I probably haven't done as much as some of them, but it's fun talking about the good old days. Of course, I wasn't born here like you were but...

EW: Yeah, well, we've known each other for a long time.

VB: Since 1953.

EW: Oh yeah. I know we've often wondered why we never made a tape of my father or my mother. Just talking to them to try to get them on tape...what they did when they were kids.

VB: One of our instructions was about that. That people don't write letters anymore like they used to years ago. It's on the telephone or on the typewriter or on the computer, and we don't save what we have - so that's what the Archives is all about. They're trying to put together something on a piece of paper. I know the same with my
ancestry in the Holland and the Zeeland area, we don't have records or letters or anything. We have some pictures but...So I think it's a good program and I support it for that reason. And I think it's nice to have.

EW: Sure. It doesn't mean that much to us right at the moment, but a couple of generations from now it might mean a lot.

VB: "That's what Holland was like back then!" (laughs) Well, okay. Thank you very much, Earl.

EW: Well, thank you, Bud. It's been my pleasure.